



# A Quiet Giant



BY JIM PREVOR

**Stephen D'Arrigo was a man of faith, constrained not just by the letter of the law but also by concepts of right and wrong.**

**W**hen I think about the recall vote in California or how Delta Airlines set up a special bankruptcy-proof pension plan just for top executives, or about how the Texas Republicans are trying to reapportion the House of Representatives districts in that state, I counterpoise these things with what the loss of Stephen D'Arrigo symbolizes for the produce industry.

I write about Mr. D'Arrigo (I knew him all my adult life and never would dream of calling him Steve, although he offered me that courtesy more than once), not because his loss will have great effect on the industry — the truth is that his passing will be unlikely to affect the business, as three of his sons have been ably running D'Arrigo Bros. Co. of New York.

Nor because the industry will lose a champion — although it is true that he was instrumental in moving the New York City Terminal Market to Hunts Point from Washington Street and was a tireless advocate of his industry and his city; true that he served on many a committee and board, and was a behind-the-scenes counselor to many, including this author.

Yet the loss we have suffered in losing Stephen D'Arrigo is incalculable, for he was, in the biggest city in the country, in one of the oldest industries in the world, a living reminder of an age when people put their own name on the company door, as if to tell the world that "I stand behind what happens here".

He didn't hate his competitors but worked for the advancement of all. With his family's extensive involvement in both wholesaling and growing, he, perhaps uniquely, straddled two worlds and strove to help each understand the other better.

He didn't do "whatever it takes" to win, and he felt an obligation to support those institutions, including this magazine, that he felt contributed to a better industry and a better world.

I went to his funeral in a modest church near his home, and I wondered if people there realized that this was a man who could have had his ceremony in St. Patrick's Cathedral. The only obituary was a small notice in a local newspaper, although he was a man of stature and accomplishment and could have

had a large obituary in *The New York Times*. But he was of another time and didn't think getting fifteen minutes of fame was desirable. Aggrandizement of his person was a concept alien to him.

Much that is wrong in the world is because laws have become the only constraining factor on people's behavior. So rappers curse on their songs, comics curse in their stand-up routines, a great basketball player explains he is innocent, as he didn't rape but only committed adultery.

I'm not a fan of Gray Davis and the recall is completely constitutional. Equally, the Texas Republicans were denied their due in the last reapportionment of seats in the house, and there is no law against redistricting for the second time after the census comes out. Delta's plan to keep top executives by installing a "bankruptcy-proof" pension plan follows the letter of every rule and regulation.

Most of what makes life bearable, however, is not dictated by any law; it is dictated by custom and tradition, often grounded in rules of conduct established by religious faith.

So Delta Airlines casually breaks the connection between employees and bosses, in California they casually set aside the custom of only holding elections on a set schedule, and in Texas they toss aside the custom that reapportionment happens only once every decade.

The life of Stephen D'Arrigo was devoted to building his business and raising his family. Yet he was a man of faith, constrained not just by the letter of the law but also by concepts of right and wrong.

Stephen D'Arrigo was a subtle, respectful and kind man. He would invite me to lunch and would ask me questions as if I didn't have a hundred times more to learn from him than he from me. And he cared more than most. He never saw me without inquiring as to the prosperity of my business.

He knew the answers in his very bones to questions that have been forgotten. He didn't talk much, though; you had to learn his lessons by observation. So in a world of rough men I never heard him use a profanity, and he wore a suit to the office showing respect to his employees, his customers, his suppliers, his family and himself.

Perhaps I make him sound too somber;

he was not. He enjoyed his friends; each winter he would go to Florida and call up all the old fruit men from New York and have a lunch to renew acquaintances and remember old times.

He built a business from scratch but loved his children. He found time to coach their teams and be part of their lives. I call some of his children my friends, and they would blush if they knew how he would speak of them in private, with his eyes lighting up when he would point to their happiness and a tear in his eye when he would mention their heartbreaks.

And he had an eye for beauty too. He did a number of acquisitions in business, but his smartest merger was with Mary Jane, whose vibrant spirit lifted him to accomplish all he did. The first time I saw Stephen D'Arrigo was on the walk in Hunts Point when my father introduced us. The last was a visit to his winter apartment in Boca Raton, and on the shelf sits a great, and recent, photo of Mary Jane D'Arrigo white water rafting.

It is said that when Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died within moments of each other on July 4, 1826, fifty years to the day after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the country saw the hand of providence at work.

So when Stephen D'Arrigo passed away on July 4, 2003, the fifty-fifth anniversary of his journey to New York from Boston to open D'Arrigo Bros. Co. of New York, we can see divinely laid bookends to a life well lived. We shall not see his kind again. **pb**